

## Writing in the Japanese English Classroom

### —A Broader Perspective—

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#### Introduction

Writing, like speaking, is a means of communication. Both aspects of the language are used to express one's ideas, feelings, thoughts, or to give or request information. Unlike spoken language, however, reading and writing are not acquired naturally or unconsciously. They both require a conscious learning process. In general, the learner of the written language is working towards a greater control of meaning. Because of the interdependent relationship of reading and writing, the introduction of this paper will discuss both processes, however the remainder of the paper will focus on writing, and in particular, the importance of it in the Japanese EFL classroom.

Reading and writing are both active processes in which a person is creating and constructing meaning. The two processes are very similar in that the learner is working from a surface structure level in the beginning stages, to a deep structure level in the advanced stages. The two processes are similar and closely intertwined, although basically in an opposite order. Reading can be seen as starting with a text, processing it (i.e. decoding it using various strategies), and constructing meaning in the mind of the reader. Writing starts at the other end- that is, starting with the meaning in the mind of the writer, processing it (i.e. clarifying thoughts, discovery, revision), and ending up with the text. In both processes, the meaning can continually change and be controlled by the reader or writer. That is to say, the reader can reconstruct meaning as he reads further, reflects and/or rereads a text. A writer can change the meaning as he is writing and developing thoughts - which often results in a product quite different from the original idea. It is this control of meaning that makes both reading and writing very personal and active processes.

When the language learner begins to read, he becomes aware that written language is linked to spoken language - that reality can be related to a symbol. The initial focus is more on the actual structure of the language - the pieces, directionality and sound-symbol relationship. As the learner moves into the more advanced beginning level, he

begins recognizing parts of sentences and uses his content schema to fill in the gaps in the meaning. Because of the more complex and technical aspects of the written language, the learner's means of constructing or creating meaning vary at the different levels of proficiency. The learner's limited knowledge of the written language in the beginning stages, limits what meaning he can create in writing, and what meaning he can construct from reading.

The beginning writer also works more on understanding the form and the convention of writing, rather than creating meaning. He focuses on the smaller parts (i.e. learning symbols, working on spelling, word order, etc.) Because the writer must create meaning, he can only express what he can write - he cannot fill in gaps in meaning with his content schema, as in reading.

At the intermediate reading level, meaning is now being constructed from larger chunks. The learner is no longer limited to past experiences - he can build upon his past by acquiring new information through reading. Because he begins to create meaning by looking at the whole, he is also able to think critically about the text and compare his own viewpoints.

The intermediate writer also moves away from the smaller pieces and begins to create meaning by being able to construct whole sentences and paragraphs. The focus of the learner moves away from form and on to meaning. Although language is still limiting what can be expressed, the learner is developing circumlocution skills. Writing at this level also becomes separated from writing down spoken language - rhetorical form comes into the focus to help create meaning in a comprehensible manner.

At the advanced level of reading, the reader now constructs meaning from the text, his past experiences, and reading between the lines. Reading skills have been learned well enough for the learner to read about abstract ideas and think critically about other's writing. Reading is now a tool for constructing content schema about things unknown to the reader.

At the advanced writing level, writing is a means of clarifying thoughts and expressing them in the proper register. The writer has the skills to critically read his own writing. Writing is now a creative process in which language is used as a tool to create meaningful texts, rather than limit the writer as it did earlier.

It is the similarities and connections of the two processes that make learning them simultaneously more effective than learning them separately. With a wholistic approach to language learning/teaching, the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are closely intertwined and inseparable. Because becoming a good writer takes a great deal of practice, a writing class can provide students with a more concentrated amount of time for writing, but can also integrate the other three skills as well.

#### Why is writing particularly important for Japanese students ?

Writing is creative and personal. It allows students to use the imagination and

creativity within them. It gives them tangible results wherein they can see this creativity and have the satisfaction of communicating in English and manipulating the language. In a culture which highly respects the Confucian values of hard work, perseverance, competition and the master/disciple relationship, writing allows the freedom to express individual thoughts that may otherwise be repressed. Traditional values may help students do well on exams, but tend to emphasize rote memorization rather than creativity and self-expression. Writing is a personal and creative process that cannot be handed down from teacher to student. It is through practice that students will develop their writing skills.

**Writing can be beneficial to all aspects of language learning.** Successful communication and creativity foster a positive reaction, which in turn increases motivation. This in turn, increases the desire to practice and improve - a snowball effect. This will carry over to all aspects of the students' language learning as they progress and gain confidence. Having spent many hours of tiring grammar translations and reading texts that might be meaningless to them, students often need to overcome negative feelings associated with English and to feel a greater sense of personal investment in their learning.

**Writing is a means of communication.** Students nowadays have grown up with the term "internationalization" and the myth that speaking English will somehow make them international, thus the highly popular "Eikaiwa" class. If speaking truly were the goal of language learners in Japan, the system that encourages exams, grammar translations and large conversation classes that meet once a week would be changed. With their limited exposure to the spoken language, students are often afraid of speaking, but speaking is not the only way to communicate. If students are uneasy speaking, and therefore holding back, the teacher can give them the opportunity to express themselves in another medium, which in turn will build self-confidence. One of the great advantages of writing is that it is much easier for students to get additional practice outside of class time. It also eliminates uncomfortable pauses or silences, and pronunciation is not an issue. This is not to undermine the importance of the speaking and listening activities they need, but to stress the usefulness of writing as a way to develop all aspects of their language learning. Writing does not need to be confined strictly to the writing class, nor do speaking activities to the "conversation" class.

**Writing reduces the peer pressure that may be present when speaking.** With so much emphasis placed on group conformity, peer pressure can be a strong driving force in the Japanese classroom. Writing provides an outlet for students who are embarrassed to speak out in class either because they think they will appear "too good" or "too bad." Quiet students are often very articulate in their writing. Writing in a different language can be particularly helpful. Students can step aside from the restraints of their own cultural norms and express thoughts they normally would not.

**Writing develops critical thinking skills.** As one's ideas evolve and grow on paper, it is necessary for the writer to clarify, re-examine and revise. Writing cultivates this

ability to develop one's thoughts and to express them clearly and precisely. The writer must be focused as he looks deeper, in order to expound on an idea and to express it in the most efficient manner.

**Writing is easily adaptable to large classes.** Obviously, for the amount of papers to be graded by the teacher, small classes would be ideal. In respect to the actual writing practice of the students, however, class size is unimportant. Students may work individually, in pairs or groups, leaving the teacher free to circulate and help individuals. Students also receive personal attention through the teacher's comments when the paper is evaluated. Due to the generally large size of classes in all subjects, this personal feedback from the teacher can be particularly meaningful and valuable for the Japanese student. (The nature of these comments will be further discussed in the section on error correction.)

### Ways to Develop and Encourage Writing

Writing should be introduced early into any language learning, as it is a complex process requiring a great deal of time and practice. Writing skills improve only through usage, therefore the teacher must provide ample opportunity for practice, along with some skills and strategies for writing more effectively. Discussion and explanation time should be limited and the emphasis placed on actual writing. By helping to make writing enjoyable, and by using meaningful materials, the teacher can cultivate the students interest in writing and enhance their desire to practice. Writing should be pleasurable, not drudgery. Students often complain that Japanese English texts are all too often irrelevant or linguistically too advanced. Students are frequently asked to translate, focusing on the bits rather than the overall meaning, then to answer questions that can be pulled directly from the text, with the result that they may go through an entire exercise without understanding it, without creating anything, and without enjoying it. The desire to continue learning is thus jeopardized. As with any learning process, learning will be much greater if the student is invested in the material.

A good way of creating meaningful material is to draw upon students' personal experiences or use student-generated topics. Personal stories, current issues or topics that are somehow related to their lives can be very motivating. This may not always be entirely possible, (i.e. learning about a new topic, a certain structure or form, or writing fiction), however there are ways to make any material more meaningful and personal. Using one's imagination makes an activity personal. Combining visual aids with writing can bring an activity to life, stimulate creativity, and help students comprehend a given text. The teacher should use a variety of materials in the class to address individual tastes and to cover a broad range of writing styles.

To help give meaning to an exercise, the use of pre-writing activities is crucial. Giving the students some background, vocabulary or time to think about the topic at hand, will greatly increase the relevance to the student, as well as aid their general

comprehension. This can be done in a variety of ways. Some examples of pre-writing activities include vocabulary exercises, leading questions, brainstorming ideas or vocabulary, discussions, interviews, using pictures, reading, or listening to songs. Oral exercises can be especially useful with low-level students, as it helps them learn vocabulary and gain confidence for the following writing activity. The students should always bear in mind that writing is a form of communication.

### **Ideas for Writing Activities**

#### **Journals**

Keeping a journal in English is an excellent way of getting daily writing practice that is 100% personal. It can also be an outlet for suppressed feelings, inner thoughts and creativity. The teacher can participate in a written dialog with the student by writing personal comments in the students journals about the content, but avoiding correction. This shows the student that he is successfully communicating and that the teacher is interested in what he has to say. This generally has a very positive effect, and the quantity and quality of the writing increases as the student is eager to continue this sort of written dialog. Ten minutes a day of free writing is a good beginning, although students should be encouraged to write more.

#### **Dictation**

The traditional method of dictation consists of the teacher reading a text two or three times followed by the students writing what they heard. However, there are limitless variations to dictation. The texts can be from any source, including student written texts. They can be read by the teacher, by the students, or on a tape. In length, they can be a few words, a few paragraphs, or be presented in the form of questionnaires. They can be done as a class, in pairs, in groups or individually with recordings. It is an active process that involves both oral and written communication. Because the size of the class is not important, it is ideal with large Japanese classes. It forces students to listen carefully and helps develop self-correcting skills. It is also good for teachers who are non-native speakers of English and may feel self-conscious about their speaking, as they can practice in advance, use tapes, have students dictate to each other or even to themselves in the language lab. (For further dictation ideas, see Davis and Rinvulcri, 1988.)

#### **Letter Writing**

There are many variations on this well-known theme. Students can write letters to real or imaginary readers. They can write to each other, the teacher, pen pals, fictional characters, friends or family members. Letters are particularly useful in that the reader is named, so there is a clear goal of communication. By using authentic materials, such as writing for information from magazine advertisements, or writing to real people,

students feel they are genuinely communicating. Many different styles and functions may be practiced through letter writing - e.g. business letters, formal or informal letters, letters that request information, make complaints, describe people, places or events. Students can write as themselves or under an assumed identity.

### “Speedwriting”

This activity can be done anytime. It is particularly good as a warm-up at the beginning of a class, however. Students write on a topic for 10 minutes without stopping, and without using an eraser or dictionary. The topic can be given by the teacher, by a student or chosen freely by the individual. At the end of 10 minutes, they are told to stop writing, count their words, and record the number on a chart provided by the teacher. (The chart is a grid with the dates on the horizontal axis and the numbers on the vertical axis.) The numbers record is optional, but it does seem to encourage students to write faster. The purpose is to develop fluency and speed, and allow for practice with no concern for form. For this reason, it is better that the teacher *not* read the papers. If he does, however, he should refrain from any corrections or marking of errors. The students' reaction to this is generally very positive, as they are producing large amounts of writing, without the fear of making mistakes.

### Publishing/Displaying Written Work

A school or class newspaper gives students something tangible that they can be proud of, something they can produce themselves. It also gives other students reading material written by their peers, which may be more interesting and relevant to them. A newspaper, for example, can be produced as a class project, with a final product printed at the end of the year. In this case, each student could contribute their best piece of work. Or, it could be a regularly published school newspaper. This has the advantage of providing an outlet for students who want additional writing experience outside of class and want to pursue their creativity. Whether it is for a publication, or for a poster display, such written work usually increases student motivation and helps them to raise the quality of their work.

### Interviews

Interviews offer a wide range of topics to write about, as well as give oral practice if they are conducted in English. Interviewing other students in class can combine speaking, listening, writing and getting to know classmates better. Writing the interview dialog is good practice, as is writing interview summaries. The students may interview each other, the teacher, or an English-speaker in English, however, this does not exclude the possibility of interviewing in Japanese which can then be translated and written up in English. Conducting interviews in Japanese can give students the opportunity to learn about something new and ask questions they normally may not ask. A good example of this stems from a recent activity in my composition class. The students interviewed

a grandparent or another elderly person about their life during World War II, and then wrote about it in English. The feedback was very positive - all of the students were well prepared, said they learned something, were moved and felt closer to the interviewee. An interview can be done very casually with an acquaintance or family member, or more formally with someone the student does not know well, but who the student is interested in. In the case of a formal interview, students should be aware of the etiquette involved, i.e. making an appointment, being prepared, listening carefully or taping the conversation, and showing their appreciation appropriately afterwards.

### **Missing Information**

The teacher can provide students with a text that is not complete. By omitting something from a text and piquing a student's curiosity, motivation and self-investment can be increased. This could take the form of an unfinished story for which students must write the ending. It could also be an information gap activity where students working in pairs have a text with some information missing. Together they must communicate to obtain the missing information. Another technique is the use of cloze texts (texts with certain words or phrases omitted). The answers can be guessed by the students before hearing the text in its entirety. The text for a cloze activity can be a recorded song, or a text or dialog that is read or played on a tape. These techniques are also effective ways of integrating listening and speaking.

### **Story- telling**

In some form, there should be a story that will interest any student. Writing stories, whether it is from a personal experience, a fairy tale, an original story, or fiction or non-fiction, can be as creative and imaginative as a student wishes. Stories can be emotional, anecdotal, amusing, or educational. They can be original stories, old stories, or old stories with a new edge (stories with a new ending or involving different characters, for example). Every student has a story in them - some just do not know it.

### **Structural drills**

Structural drills should be limited, so the focus remains on content, but students still need some basic instruction in sentence structure, paragraph form, punctuation, etc. Although it is often said that Japanese students are good at writing and grammar, compared to speaking in English, this is not always the case. Explicit grammar instruction need not be a bore, however. Amusing texts or pictures can be used to make drills more interesting. Sentences with errors, taken from the students' homework, can be used as examples to teach corrections without shaming the error maker. To encourage students to focus on fluency, form can be worked on separately and should not be the main objective of a class.

### Error Correction

When deciding when and what to correct, the teacher must consider what is the focus of a particular writing assignment. A paper that is covered with red marks and corrections may give the impression that the teacher is doing his job, but the focus is then on errors - a negative factor which all too often affects student motivation. If the goal of the class is to improve students' writing and to help them enjoy it, then this is not the best way. The teacher must be clear on the purpose of the writing, and whether it is the content or the form that will be examined. One hazard of over-correction is that students learn to write what they think the teacher wants them to write. Limiting corrections is not to say that students should be allowed to continually make the same errors, but that students are not expected to produce *everything* correctly on each writing task, and that there is a clear focus to the purpose of the exercise, whether it is purely content or a specific grammar point. By focusing on errors, the teacher is picking at minor elements and possibly undermining the point of writing - that is to communicate.

To limit corrections, the teacher may choose one thing (or several things) to look at in a paper, for example, topic sentences, articles, verb tenses, etc. If every error is marked, it becomes overwhelming for the student. It may be more beneficial to concentrate on certain areas, and restrict this to an amount that students can grasp. It is particularly important in the early stages of writing to limit corrections. The student should be allowed to develop the skill of composing and developing thoughts in the writing process with a focus is on fluency rather than accuracy. Through continuous practice and reading, the students' writing, as well as their overall language ability, will improve.

### Conclusion

Writing is an active process and a form of communication that cannot be unconsciously acquired, and that requires a great deal of practice. Because it is an active and creative process, it is not knowledge that can be passed from teacher to student, nor can it be memorized or does it have a set formula. It is therefore necessary for the role of the teacher to be a facilitator who encourages self-investment and pleasure, as well as provides some tools and structure for effective writing. To insure that students are motivated and get sufficient practice, the teacher should use materials that are meaningful and enjoyable, give them positive feedback, and allow them the time to write.

There is a misconception in Japan that students need only speaking and listening practice, and that their grammar and writing skills are adequate because of their past traditional English studies. In general, Japanese students have had little experience writing compositions, and rarely have they been taught that writing is a process. They often arrive in college feeling discouraged that their years of English study have not enabled them to communicate in English. For them, this normally means speaking, but they are often unaware that writing is also a means of communication. They may feel that they have had enough writing practice, but they must bear in mind that grammar



translations and creative writing are two separate entities.

The teacher can help develop students' fluency by focusing on the content rather than the form. This will also help break their past learning habits of concentrating on the pieces instead of the overall meaning, and expecting one correct answer. It is important for the teacher to discourage their preoccupation with form and correct answers, as it is a great hindrance to their general comprehension and communicative skills. Some time needs to be allowed for the students' ability to improve through practice, in addition to explicit instruction. Given time, students will find writing a valuable tool in all English classes. It is a form of communication that is non-threatening, and helping build the students' self-confidence, it will carry over to all aspects of their language ability.

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